

From: Grace Cochrane
Sent: Sunday, 3 October 2010 3:11 PM
To:
Subject: Dismantling of exhibition: 'Inspired! Design across time', Powerhouse Museum

Dismantling *Inspired! design across time*: plans for the future?

26 September 2010

Dear all,

The issue:

Many of you have been asking why the Powerhouse Museum's permanent/long-term collection-based exhibition of decorative arts, crafts and design, *Inspired! Design across time*, was dismantled after only 4 ½ years, without warning or explanation, in the first week of the 2010 Sydney Design festival.

<http://www.powerhousemuseum.com/previous/inspired.php>

In not announcing reasons, or plans for the future, it is as if we, the many constituents and audiences, are not acknowledged or valued.

Below is my letter to the Museum's director, Dawn Casey, asking that she reassure the various stakeholders for what this exhibition represents, that plans are in place to reinstall it in some way, very soon. Her reply to this (second) letter, advised: 'you may rest assured the Powerhouse is not limiting its collecting and overall programming in the areas of design, fashion, decorative arts and crafts.'

However, despite rumours of redevelopment to take place in some form on the floor below there appear to be no plans, either for the displaced exhibition, or for the vacated space (presumably to be used for temporary incoming exhibitions). As it took 8 years to develop and finally install *Inspired!*, after 20 years of negotiation, your concerns about its successor appear to be valid. There appear to be no plans to dismantle the permanent exhibitions of science and technology.

I have advised the Director that I will refer your enquiries to her.

Background information:

The collection:

- The Powerhouse Museum is still, in fact, the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, and the holdings of applied arts/decorative arts/crafts/design, developed over 130 years, are a core aspect of its responsibility, as set out in the legislation. The collection has international recognition, and is considered the major example of its kind in Australia.
- These holdings are unique in Australia not only for their scope and span across time, but for the links that can be made with science, technology and industry, as well as social history (whose collection-based exhibitions are now largely dismantled).
- *Inspired! Design across time* was developed as a core, collection-based, changing, exhibition, designed to provide a story of development that would be a key reference to the field; contextualise a range of temporary exhibitions; and also complement the Indigenous and Asian galleries (now dismantled).
- Constituents and audiences, built up over some decades, feel strongly that they have 'earned' a stake in the Powerhouse Museum, and expect a continuing commitment to this field, both historical and contemporary.

Repercussions of decision to dismantle:

- Apart from the strength of the Museum's website, the loss of direct access to collection objects through exhibitions such as this, diminishes the cultural profile of NSW and the Museum's reputation.

- It also diminishes its role as an educational resource, where the historical informs the contemporary, by providing context, stories and exemplars – past and present; and broadening perspectives across time, space and cultures. Temporary exhibitions, however excellent, do not provide these broad, contextual, core frameworks.
- Notwithstanding the excellence of online access to the collection, this is no replacement for the experience of seeing objects, and discovering their stories, in the Museum itself. Direct access to the collection is an essential part of the Museum's obligations.
- There is a real danger of the various stakeholders becoming disenfranchised.

Other factors: repercussions:

- This decision appears to be the result of a combination of internal decisions about priorities and preferences, and external funding pressures.
- In recent years the State Government has vastly reduced funding to cultural institutions, although it appears that funds have been allocated to the Powerhouse recently for some capital development.
- In the Powerhouse Museum, curatorial staff has been depleted, with serious loss of knowledge in some fields; there appears to be no clear succession strategy towards to a new generation of curators; the position of Deputy Director has been abolished; in the Senior Management team there is no permanent position responsible for collections.
- Acquisition funds have been seriously cut, and the Museum is falling badly behind in its representation of contemporary crafts and design, a factor difficult to rectify in future years. This is affecting the profile of the Museum in the broad design, crafts and education communities.

What you can do:

- You are one of the many stakeholders/audiences for this aspect of the collection: of designers, craftspeople, students, collectors, donors, museum professionals, dealers, writers, educators and researchers. If you share these concerns about removing the exhibition with no warning, and no clear plans for its replacement, it would be very helpful if you wrote about them, from your point of view, to:

Dr. Dawn Casey, Director, Powerhouse Museum
PO Box K346, Haymarket, Sydney, NSW 1238, dawnc@phm.gov.au

- ***Of most value, I believe, would be confirmation of exactly what the collection, and an exhibition drawn from it, means to you and the field of which you are part, and what you would expect in any plans for the future.***

Yours sincerely,

Grace Cochrane

From: Grace Cochrane
Sent: Friday, 17 September 2010 2:28 PM
To: Dawn Casey
Subject: Dismantling 'Inspired: design across time': plans for the future?

Dr. Dawn Casey
Director
Powerhouse Museum
PO Box K346
Haymarket, Sydney, NSW 1238
dawnc@phm.gov.au

Dear Dawn,

You may not have received the letter I wrote to you on 25 July, about the dismantling of what was meant to be a permanent, or at least long-term, changing exhibition, *Inspired! Design across time*.

I am writing again, because in the intervening weeks, I have been approached by many people across the broad sector who shared an interest in what *Inspired!* represented. They want to find out why this had happened, and what the Museum's plans are for the future of this important aspect of the collection, which they see as equally significant as, for example, science and technology and popular culture.

Their responses to the dismantling – which astonishingly started in the first week of Sydney Design – range from puzzled and disappointed, to betrayed, frustrated and angry. After anticipating such an exhibition for many years, few can believe it has been pulled out after less than five years, with no discernable explanation, or plan for the future. It is as if their interests didn't count, and I fear that you will lose their support.

I can't provide an answer for them, of course, but I must say I also share their feelings.

While clearly not providing the figures that might be expected for a blockbuster or short-term, popular exhibition, the audiences for this part of the museum's collection (where the exhibition was intended as a core, changing reference for temporary exhibitions) are varied, substantial and influential. They are local, national and international in their origin, and have used the exhibition as a point of reference and research as designers and makers, students, professional colleagues, historians, critics, teachers, donors and collectors, as well as members of the general public who felt that, through this collection, the Powerhouse Museum was 'for them'.

The Powerhouse Museum's collection of decorative arts, crafts and design is unique in Australia through the associations that can be made, not only across its specific field, but also with science, industry, technology and society. But it has to be visible and accessible, and also tell its own significant stories.

I strongly recommend that you consider making public whatever plans you may have for ensuring that this part of the collection will be accessible in the Museum's exhibition spaces.

I will also recommend to the people whom I know to be concerned, that they should write directly to you for information.

Yours sincerely,

Grace Cochrane